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Community, Trade and
Economic Development

Emergency Food Assistance Program Customer Survey Report

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Appendices

- Customer Survey
- Instructions for food banks administering survey (available as a separate document due to length)

About the Surveys

During April-May 2008, the Washington State Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP), with encouragement from the EFAP Advisory Committee, conducted surveys of its contractors. This project was a follow-up to the feedback and capacity building project completed by the Washington Food Coalition in 2007 (that resulted in the publication of [A Fork in the Road](#), [Recipes for Success](#) and [Ingredients for Success](#)). A subcommittee of the EFAP Advisory Board was convened to work with consultant Laura Pierce to develop the surveys.

In addition to surveying providers, the EFAP Advisory Committee recognized the importance of hearing directly from food bank customers. Knowing that it is difficult for individual food banks to design and administer a customer feedback survey, the group decided to develop a short, general survey (Appendix A) that could be used by multiple food banks statewide. In addition, EFAP committed to do data entry and analysis for all surveys received back during the pilot phase of the project (Spring 2008).

The response to this opportunity was enthusiastic. 86 food banks participated, and 8,249 surveys were received back at the EFAP office for data entry. This report provides statewide data based on this group of surveys. Individual food banks will also receive a report detailing the comments and responses provided by their customers, and will be able to compare their performance against the statewide sample.

The main goals of the customer survey were:

- To provide a vehicle for food bank customers to give their feedback regarding what is working and what could be improved at their food bank.
- To collect demographic and other information about food bank users that will provide insight into their situations and what types of assistance might best support them in becoming food secure.
- To provide data to support anecdotal evidence that people's reasons for visiting a food bank are shifting.
- To provide useful data to State policymakers.

Each participating food bank received instructions regarding how to administer the survey at their location (Appendix B). Completed paper surveys were mailed to the EFAP office for data entry. The originating food bank was noted during data entry, to allow us to provide individual data to that food bank later.

Survey Response Rates and Methodology

A total of 8,249 surveys were completed. The survey was translated into Spanish, Russian and Chinese by food banks with a high proportion of customers in these language groups, and the translated surveys were made available to other food banks as well. In total, 172 surveys were completed in Spanish, 336 surveys were completed in Russian, and nine were completed in Chinese.

Not every survey respondent answered all the survey questions. Throughout the report, all percentages reflect the percentage of respondents answering this specific question. For example, if only 8,000 of 8,249 respondents answered a particular question, 4,000 yes answers is described as 50% yes. All percentages are rounded to the nearest percent, which could occasionally result in percentages summing to slightly more or less than 100%.

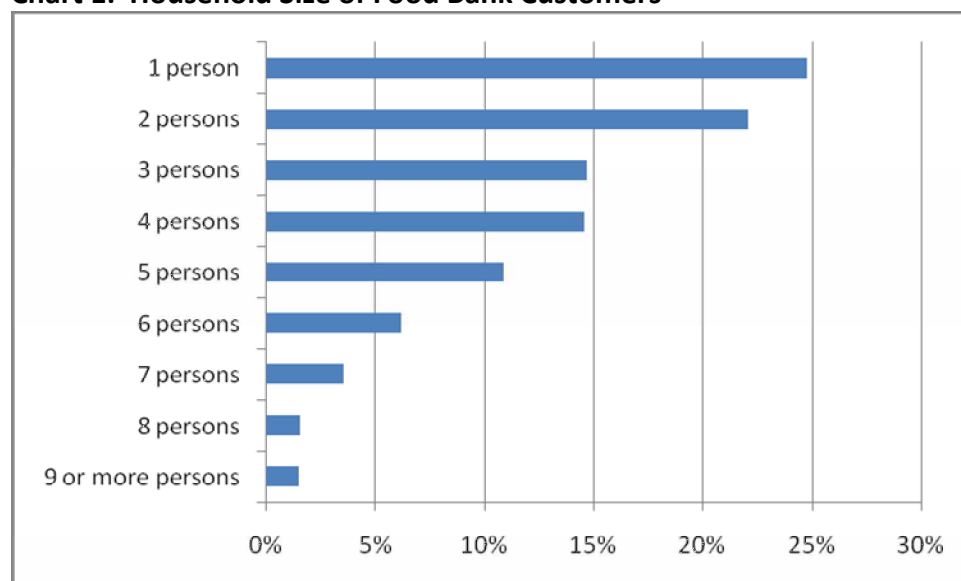
Comments from customers are quoted throughout the report to personalize the data presented.

Food Bank Customer Survey Results

Household Size and Type

Households accessing emergency food vary in size. Small families make up the majority (see chart below). 54% of households have children ages 17 and under, and 30% have young children ages five and under. 34% of households include an adult over age 55.

Chart 1: Household Size of Food Bank Customers



“The food bank is essential. A lot of us elderly would go hungry without this wonderful service. Thank you.”

Household Income

Overall, 88% of food bank customers surveyed have household incomes of less than \$2,000 per month. Chart 2 illustrates the distribution of income for all customers surveyed. However, many of the households with higher incomes support larger numbers of people. Charts 3 and 4 illustrate the differing distribution of incomes for single-person households and for large households of five or more people. For single-person households, 97% earn less than \$2,000 in monthly household income and 81% earn less than \$1,000 per month. The federal poverty level for a one person household is \$866 per month, so most of that 81% likely fall under this threshold. For a family of five, the poverty threshold is \$2,066 per month; 72% of large households (five persons or more) surveyed fall below this threshold (below \$2,000 per month). More than 94% of these larger families live at or below 150% of poverty.

Chart 2: Distribution of Monthly Household Income of Food Bank Customers

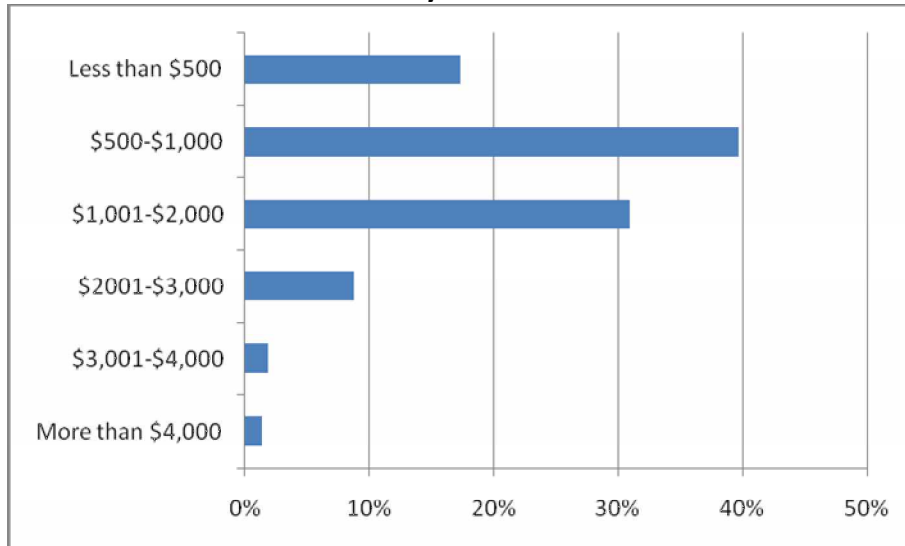


Chart 3: Distribution of Monthly Household Income for Food Bank Customers with One-Person Households

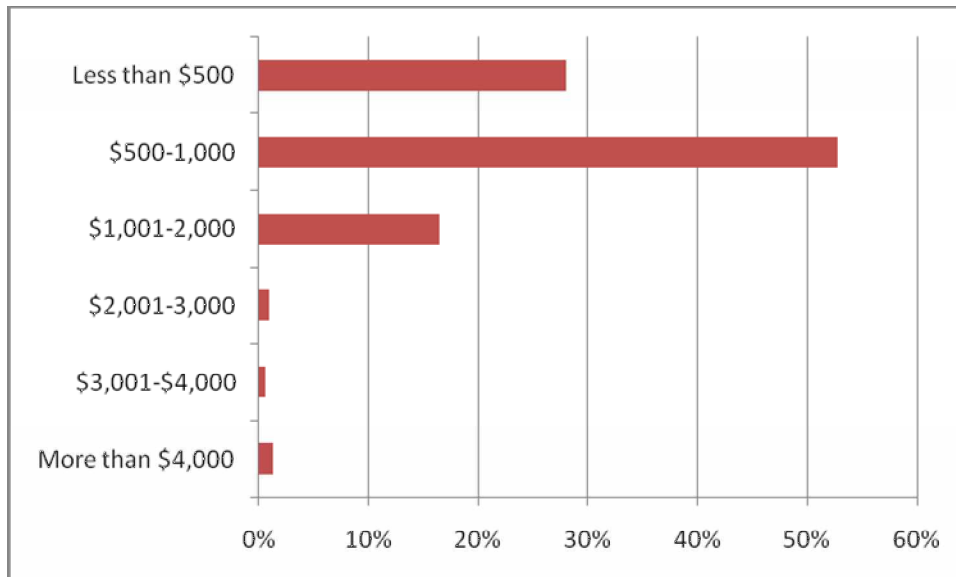
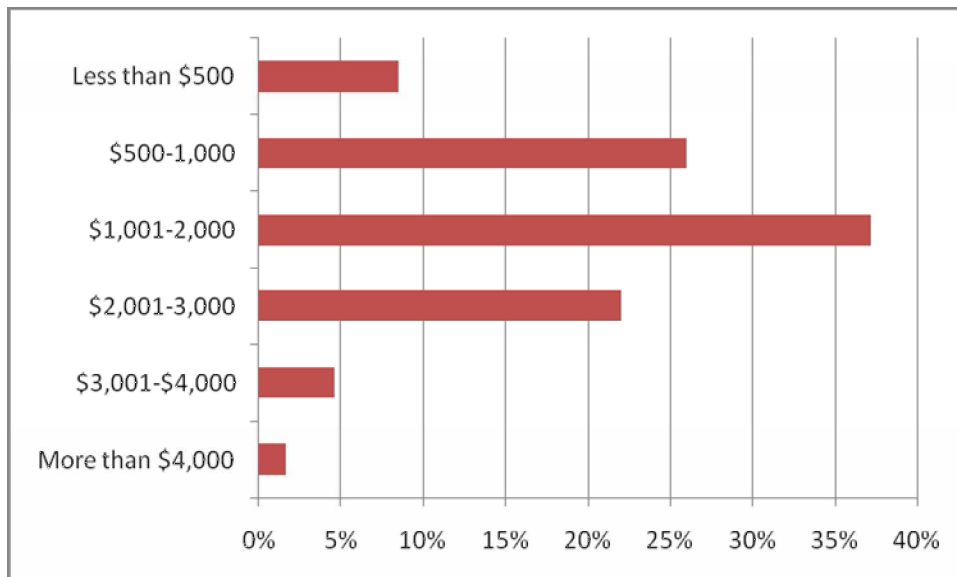


Chart 4: Distribution of Monthly Household Income for Food Bank Customers with Five or More Persons in the Household

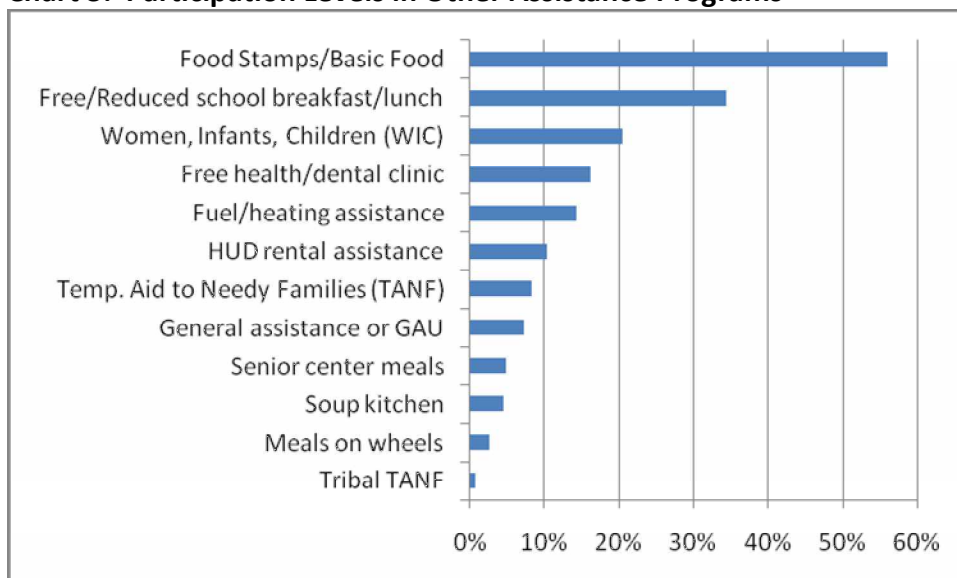


"If it wasn't for this place I would worry a lot."

Participation in other public assistance programs

Many food bank customers also receive food and cash assistance from other sources. Food stamps (56%) and free and reduced school lunch (34%) are the most widely used sources of additional assistance. Note that approximately 96% of families visiting food banks will be eligible for food stamps with the new eligibility criteria set at 200% of poverty effective October 2008.

Chart 3: Participation Levels in Other Assistance Programs



"Help me find housing for me and my kids, please. Help me get signed up for other help—computer classes, training, credit check and help fixing credit."

Special Diets

59% of food bank customers report no special dietary needs. Of the other 41%, 19% are diabetic, 16% require a low-salt and/or low-fat diet, 7% have food allergies 4% are pregnant or breastfeeding, and 5% are vegetarian or vegan. Other special dietary or medical needs raised by multiple survey respondents included lactose intolerance, hypoglycemia, heart disease/need for heart-healthy diet, need for soft foods or bland foods, low cholesterol, low or high protein diets. In addition, a few people follow kosher or halal diets for religious reasons, or struggle to obtain ethnic-specific foods or ingredients. Finally, a number of respondents commented that they are trying to eat a healthy diet including organic, fresh, low sugar, and/or whole grains.

“I am very pleased with this service. It has made a tremendous difference in the quality of my diet, as opposed to what I would/could normally buy.”

Frequency of visits

Customers were asked to indicate how often they come to the food bank over the course of the year. 27% of respondents visit their food bank on a weekly basis, 53% visit one to two times per month, 11% visit six to nine times per year, and 10% visit less than six times per year. The frequency of visits could be affected by many factors, including the reason for the visit (temporary or ongoing hardship) and the frequency of visits allowed by that particular food bank. Each food bank sets their own rules regarding how often customers can access food, as well as having a wide range in the number of hours they are open.

Reason for visiting the food bank

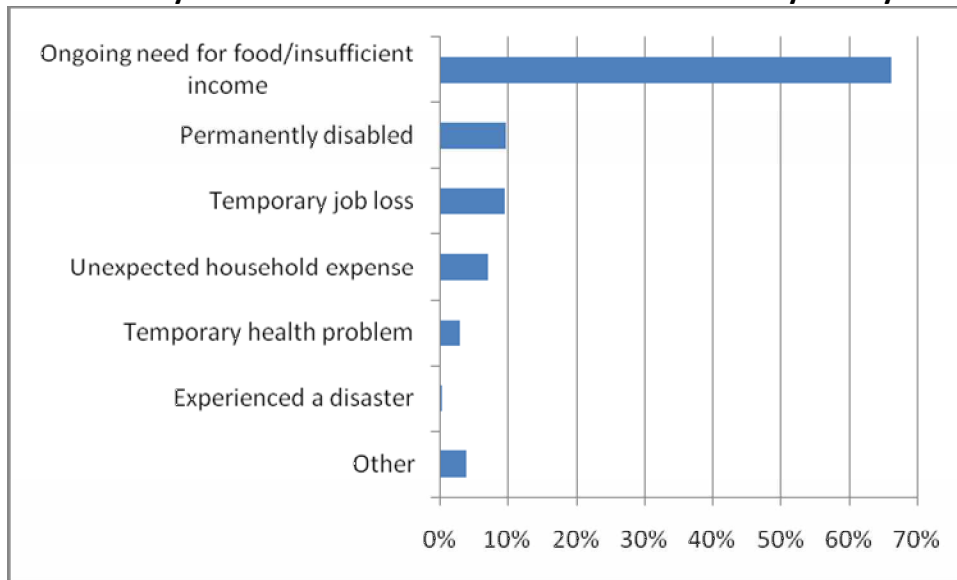
The majority (66%) indicated that they were visiting the food bank on that day due to an “ongoing need for food/insufficient income.” An additional 10% are permanently disabled. Customers visiting due to emergency or temporary need made up less than 13% of respondents.

4% of food bank customers cited another reason for their visit to the food bank. Frequently cited other reasons included homelessness, high expenses due to medically fragile or special needs children in the family, incarceration of a family member, unpaid child support, and temporary loss of public assistance.

“I am very thankful and appreciative of what you do. I try to strive for more education on my end to do a better job with what I have.”

“I am very grateful to all organizations that assist the food bank. For a family with health problems and inability to work, and consequently low income, this food bank is of great help. Thanks to all the food bank workers.”

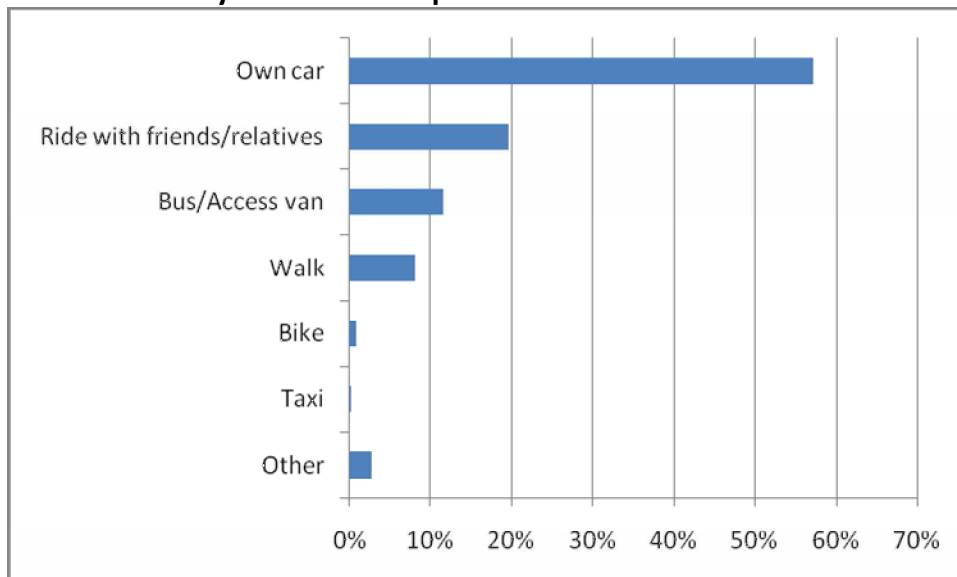
Chart 4: Why Customers Came to the Food Bank on the day surveyed



Customer Transportation

The majority (79%) of food bank customers travel to the food bank by car. 57% use their own car, 20% ride with friends or relatives, 1% borrows a car and just less than 1% is taken to the food bank by caregivers. The remainder come by bus, access van, scooter, walking, biking or uses their motorized wheelchairs to travel.

Chart 5: Primary Mode of Transportation to Food Bank



For 59% of respondents, getting to the food bank is rarely or never a problem. 34% find it “somewhat difficult” to get to the food bank, and 7% experience greater difficulty in getting there.

Customer Satisfaction

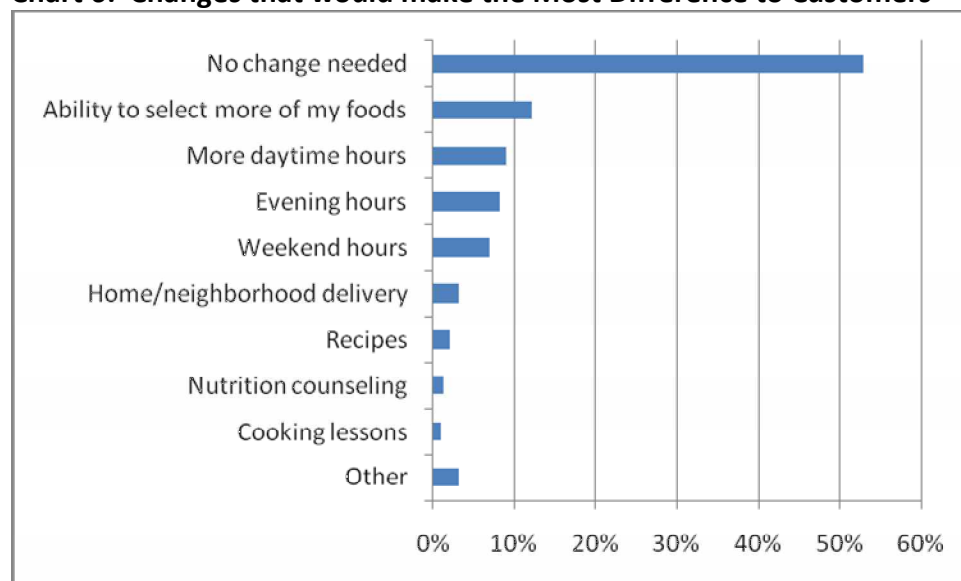
Customers were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with their food bank experience on a scale from one to five (1 = not satisfied and 5 = very satisfied) on issues ranging from service to quantity and quality of food. Overall satisfaction was very high, particularly in the areas of service by staff and service by volunteers, where 69% of respondents checked off “5”, the highest rating. In the areas of quality, quantity and variety of food, respondents were less complimentary, but still rated food banks highly. The rating of 4 or 5 was given by 68% of respondents for variety, by 72% for quantity and by 73% for Quality. Policies, registration procedures, facility layout and accessibility also received high marks.

“The people that volunteer are exceptional. The clients are able to maintain their integrity and self respect while receiving such an amazing blessing. Thank you!”

“Our local food bank has an outstanding staff. They are knowledgeable, friendly, and keep a very clean and organized facility.”

In addition, the survey asked customers to answer the question, “If the food bank were to make changes in how it operates and what services we provide, what would help you the most? (Please select just one response.)” 53% of respondents indicated that no change was needed, indicating a high level of satisfaction with current operations.

Chart 6: Changes that would make the Most Difference to Customers



Other changes specified by customers included specific food requests (meat, dairy, etc.), general requests for more food, healthier food choices and organic food, less outdated/expired food, non-food household items, and more frequent open hours and/or ability to visit more often than monthly. In addition, they made site-specific suggestions to increase facility access and comforts (eliminate stairs, offer chairs or benches for people waiting in line, have shopping carts and provide indoor waiting space).

“We should have a choice to fit our diet and cooking facilities. Some people are diabetic, some homeless and without cooking facilities to cook from scratch.”

“I like picking out my own food. It helps because the food won’t get wasted.”

Importance of the Food Bank as a Source of Food

Respondents rated the importance of the food bank as a source for different types of food on a scale from one to five (1 = not important and 5 = very important). All food types were rated highly, with a particular emphasis on the importance of protein (64% rated it a “5”), fresh fruits and vegetables (63% rated it a “5”) and dairy products (61% rated it a “5”). Least important to customers were snacks and sodas, bakery items and “condiments, baking supplies, etc.”

General Comments

At the close of the survey, customers were invited to make other comments or suggestions. The majority of comments were expressions of gratitude and appreciation for the assistance and support that customers receive. However, there were also concerns raised and suggested solutions offered. In some cases, these comments overlap with those offered in conjunction with the questions above. Concerns and ideas expressed commonly in comments are listed below.

Customers would like:

- More food choices, especially meat, staples, healthy foods, fresh vegetables, vegetarian selections, diabetic foods, non-perishable food.
- Fewer expired products.
- More non-food items, such as soap, toiletries, paper goods, first aid kit, diapers.
- Vouchers for special diet food, clothing, household items and gas.
- Other support services, such as job placement and counseling
- Ability to visit more frequently and/or receive more food.
- Shorter wait times.
- Ability to choose their own food.
- Expanded hours.
- Ethnic food choices (Russian, Mexican, etc.).
- Pet food.
- Nutrition counseling and recipe ideas.
- Expanded and/or alternative hours (evening or weekend).

Customers offered the following broadly applicable suggestions for improvement:

- Cooking classes for diabetics.
- Volunteers who speak the languages customers speak.
- Allow disabled people to come in with a non-disabled person (customer) during special hours.
- Increase parking.
- Expand delivery to people who can not get to the food bank.
- Improve access, including eliminating stairs, wider aisles for wheelchairs.
- Establish separate line for new registrants
- Improve customer service: at some food banks, customers are experiencing rudeness and racial discrimination by volunteers.

- Improve waiting area: move indoors or cover, chairs or benches, magazines to read, community bulletin board.
- Nametags for volunteers and staff.
- Involve customers as volunteers. Many would like to give back.
- Discourage people from bringing children.
- Offer appointment times rather than a long wait in line.
- Offer activities for kids such as coloring.
- Separate out specialty items such as baby goods, so that others without this need are not held up at this point in the line.
- Offer transportation via van, rideshare system, etc.

“Please offer more stuff that is not expired. I recently got something that expired in 1995!”

Recommendations to Strengthen the Emergency Food System

The data presented above is open for interpretation, and experts in the field may draw different conclusions. The following are a few observations of the consultant regarding promising areas for attention and/or investment.

Consider the implications of the fact that the majority of customers of the “emergency food system” experience ongoing rather than emergency (temporary) hunger/need. 66% of customers describe their reason for visiting the food bank as “ongoing need for food/insufficient income.” How can a system designed to meet emergency needs best adapt to address chronic food insecurity?

Notice and address the gaps between the income and family type profile of customers and the other public assistance programs they are accessing. For example, only 56% of this group received food stamps, although 88% report a household income of less than \$2,000 per month. 54% report that they have children 17 and under living in their home, but only 34% access the free and reduced school lunch program.

Continue to shift to a model of service delivery that allows greater customer choice/shopping. Customers cited the ability to select more of their foods as the top change they would like to see at their food bank.

Improve customers’ health by supplying nutritious, healthy foods and responding to special dietary needs as much as possible. 41% of food bank customers have special dietary needs, and an even larger percentage want to eat a healthier diet. Provide recipes geared to healthy eating. Have a dialogue with customers about their special needs, share nutrition information and advocate on behalf of customers.

Suggestions at the individual food bank level to improve service.

- Respond to customer concerns and suggestions expressed here and especially as expressed by customers to your individual food bank.
- Compare your performance with this aggregated summary of performance and customer satisfaction.
- Demonstrate community accountability by sharing your survey results and reporting on your resulting actions to your customers.
- Involve customers and volunteers in efforts to redesign your service.
- Commit to repeating this survey next year and striving to achieve higher marks in key areas.

Customer Survey
(Insert Name) Food Bank

We want to know how we’re doing. Thank you for a few minutes of your time to answer questions about your use and satisfaction of the food bank. This survey is **anonymous**—please answer openly and honestly. Your answers are very important to us and WILL NOT impact your ability to use the food bank. Thank you for your input!

1. How many people are in your household?

Please write the number of people in each of the age group categories in this chart. INCLUDE YOURSELF.

# of People in Household	Age Group
	Children under age 2
	Children ages 2 - 5
	Children ages 6 - 17
	Adults ages 18 – 54
	Adults over age 55

2. What is your TOTAL monthly household income? (This information will NOT impact your ability to use the food bank.)

Please include all sources.

- ☐ Less than \$500
- ☐ \$500 - \$1,000
- ☐ \$1,001 - \$2,000
- ☐ \$2,001 - \$3,000
- ☐ \$3,001 \$4,000
- ☐ More than \$4,000

3. Does your household receive assistance from any of these sources? (Please check all that apply)

- ☐ Free/Reduced-price school breakfast or lunch
- ☐ Senior Center meals
- ☐ Meals on Wheels
- ☐ WIC (Women, Infants, & Children)
- ☐ Soup kitchen
- ☐ HUD rental assistance
- ☐ Food Stamps/Basic Food
- ☐ Free Health/Dental Clinic
- ☐ Fuel/Heating Assistance
- ☐ General Assistance or GAU
- ☐ Tribal TANF
- ☐ TANF

4. What are the special dietary needs that apply to anyone in your household?

(Please check all that apply)

- ☐ No special dietary needs
- ☐ Low-salt/low-fat
- ☐ Diabetic
- ☐ Food allergies
- ☐ Pregnant/breastfeeding
- ☐ Vegan
- ☐ Vegetarian
- ☐ Other_____

5. Over the course of the year, which best describes how often you come to the food bank?

(Please check only one)

- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ 1-2 times a month
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ 6-9 times a year
- ☐ less than 6 times a year

6. What best describes why you have come to the food bank today? (Please check only one)

- ☐ Ongoing need for food/Insufficient Income
- ☐ Temporary Job Loss
- ☐ Temporary Health Problem
- ☐ Permanently Disabled
- ☐ Experienced a Disaster
- ☐ Unexpected Household Expense
- ☐ Other_____

7. What is your PRIMARY method of getting to and from the food bank? (Please check one)

- ☐ Bus/Access Van
- ☐ Own Car
- ☐ Ride with Friends
- ☐ Walk
- ☐ Bike
- ☐ Taxi
- ☐ Other_____

8. How difficult is it for you to get to the food bank?

☐ Very Difficult ☐ Somewhat Difficult ☐ Rarely or never a Problem

9. How satisfied are you with the food bank? Please rate each item below.

	Not Satisfied		Somewhat Satisfied		Very Satisfied
Service by staff	1	2	3	4	5
Service by volunteers	1	2	3	4	5
Quality of food.....	1	2	3	4	5
Quantity of food.....	1	2	3	4	5
Variety of selection	1	2	3	4	5
Food meets your nutritional and dietary needs.....	1	2	3	4	5
Facility layout and accessibility.....	1	2	3	4	5
Policies (rules, hours, code of conduct, etc.).....	1	2	3	4	5
Registration procedures.....	1	2	3	4	5

10. If the food bank were to make changes in how it operates and what services we provide, what would help you the most? (Please mark only one.)

☐ No change needed ☐ Evening Hours ☐ Weekend Hours ☐ More Daytime Hours
☐ Home/Neighborhood Delivery ☐ Nutrition Counseling ☐ Cooking Lessons
☐ Recipes ☐ Ability to Select More of My Foods ☐ Other: _____

11. Thinking about all the food consumed in your household, how important is the food bank as a source of each food type? Please circle how important on the scale below.

	Not Important		Somewhat Important		Very Important
Proteins (meats, fish, beans).....	1	2	3	4	5
Dairy (milk, cheese, yogurt).....	1	2	3	4	5
Dry goods (pasta, rice, cereal)	1	2	3	4	5
Fresh fruits and vegetables	1	2	3	4	5
Condiments, baking supplies, etc.	1	2	3	4	5
Bakery items	1	2	3	4	5
Snacks and sodas	1	2	3	4	5

What other suggestions or comments would you like to share with us?

Thank you for your participation! ☺